

The Ritual Sacrifice of Women: Misogyny and Art in *Fin-de-Siècle* Vienna

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History

How could a culture as advanced as that of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna¹ have produced some of the most outlandish artistic examples of misogyny? René Girard and others assert that society chooses a scapegoat when encountering drastic social change—social order depends on a regulated system where differences are classified and roles are assigned. When those differences and roles break down, the community will sacrifice a “surrogate victim” in whose “monstrous person” the differences are personified.² Although many historians and social critics over the years have attributed progressive politics to artists in general (particularly in the twentieth century) progressive politics could not have been farther from the psyche of many groundbreaking artists working in Vienna, Austria during the *fin-de-siècle*. Some artists were the worst offenders against women. Misogyny and the anti-feminine, both “hot topics” in the politics of the period, resulted in women being used as sacrificial victims in artistic works for the stage as well as in visual art. This paper aims to first explain some of the political atmosphere surrounding the misogynist tide in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, and then to describe how the politics of the time affected artists, who in turn made spectacles of the ritual sacrifice of women, scapegoating them for society’s rapid changes.

The Politics of Misogyny in *Fin-de-Siècle* Vienna

History

The crumbling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that began prior to the First World War led, as in that of similar empires, to the formation of “special-interest” groups with bases in ethnic and religious backgrounds. In Vienna, the epicenter of

¹ *Fin-de-siècle* is a descriptor first used by the French in 1886, in anticipation of the coming turn of the century. It has since become a name that engulfs a period stretching from roughly 1890 to the start of the first World War in 1914. See Charles Rearick, “Fin-de-Siècle,” in *Europe, 1789-1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of Industry and Power*, ed. John Merriman and David Winter. Detroit: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2006): 814.

² Lawrence Kramer, “Fin-de Siècle Fantasies: ‘Elektra,’ Degeneration, and Sexual Science,” in *Opera Journal* Vol. 5, no. 2 (July 1993): 150.

the Habsburg's empire, the party in power through the second half of the nineteenth century was progressive, and dominated by a liberal, educated, primarily Jewish middle class. By the mid-nineteenth century, this class had a long history of struggling against "aristocratic and Baroque absolutism."³ In their attempts to insinuate themselves into the aristocratic classes (and those of the Hapsburg Empire in particular were not open to new blood), the rising bourgeoisie and other middle classes eventually began to distinguish themselves through education and intellectualism, creating a new kind of elite that existed parallel to the aristocratic classes by the *fin-de-siècle* period. By 1895, however, the liberal power in Vienna and in the Austro-Hungarian Empire had waned.

In 1895, a conservative anti-Semite was elected to become the Mayor of Vienna — Karl Lueger. A man later admired by Adolf Hitler, and credited by some (controversially) with strewing the first seeds of what would later become Nazism, Lueger rose to power in an atmosphere open to anti-Semitism, racism, and misogyny. During this time, splintered Austrian nationalist groups were gaining power and were prone to strong feelings against "other" groups. Beginning in the 1880s, nationalist and ethnic special-interest groups formed parties to challenge the liberal parliament of the Empire in power at the time, parties centered on anti-Semitic Christian ideals, Socialism, and Slavic nationalism, to name a few.⁴ Following Lueger's election, the emperor, Franz Josef II, refused to acknowledge his mandate. It was on this victory that Sigmund Freud famously lit a cigar in the emperor's honor for refusing to sanction Lueger's election. It was not until 1897 that the emperor was forced to accept Lueger as the mayor of Vienna.

Formation of Women's-Rights Groups and the Resulting Backlash

At the same time as the political environment gradually changed in Vienna from one of tolerance and progressiveness to a "supremacist culture"⁵ of anti-Semitism and widespread misogyny, women's rights groups formed, threatening the male establishment and inspiring a number of poisonous anti-feminine treatises. Although there was always anti-feminism in Austria, it became more pronounced in the late nineteenth century with the rise of an organized political movement of feminists. Anti-feminine and misogynist writers became particularly harsh around this time. Even passing mention of activist women in the press were

³ Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 5.

⁴ Schorske 5.

⁵ Kramer, 150.

cruel: during the mayoral election campaign period in Vienna in 1901, for instance, the media called the middle-class feminists who combined forces to help the Social Democrat Victor Adler win the election “whores,” “prostitutes,” and other indelicate names owing to their political activity.⁶ Harriett Anderson breaks down the groups of anti-feminists into three categories: the conservatives, the artists, and the scientists. Anderson explains that the artists saw feminist women as frustrated and jealous of sexually “free” women—some artists felt that the anger feminists voiced over the field of prostitution was in fact a ruse to keep less attractive women on the same playing field as more attractive women, thereby denying men access to more attractive women. Male artists in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna felt that men alone made the culture, and believed women’s suffrage was a symbol of cultural chaos brought on by the female rejection of femininity.⁷ Karl Kraus suggested that the women’s movement’s work toward sexual morality was really “masquerading as vicarious sexual titillation.”⁸ Sigmund Freud attributed women’s-rights movements to the penile envy that feminists in particular were unable to overcome.⁹ Freud also believed there was a connection between these movements and lesbianism. One major attack of the anti-feminist faction in Vienna its opposition conceived the argument that women who strove for women’s voting and working rights were unattractive and, therefore, unable to find husbands. These are just a few examples of the angry banter between two sides of the cultural divide during the gender crisis of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. The most famous misogynist writing, however, appeared in 1903, and was published by a 23-year-old Jewish man who killed himself shortly after his work’s publication.

Otto Weininger and His Critics

Misogynists, especially in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, use a binary lens through which they assess society. If women are excluded from the public sphere, culture and society can be preserved. For prominent misogynists in Vienna, allowing women to share the public sphere with men would cause them to lose interest in marriage and families; and the “mere effect of female influence would be harmful.”¹⁰ Although the seeds of the anti-feminine movement in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna had already been prevalent for centuries, the new, virulent strain exploded

⁶ Harriett Anderson, *Utopian Feminism: Women’s Movements in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 1.

⁷ Anderson, 2-4.

⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁹ Ibid, 4.

¹⁰ Agatha Schwartz, “Austrian Fin-de-Siècle Heteroglossia: the Dialogism in Misogyny, Feminism, and Viriphobia,” in *German Studies Review* 28/2 (2005): 355; 365 n56.

in 1903 when Otto Weininger published his still-famous *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex and Character), just before he took his own life. Admirers of the treatise included many of Vienna's greatest intellectuals at the time of its publication, including Karl Kraus, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Arnold Schoenberg, and Adolf Loos. Weininger's work aimed to differentiate between the underlying natures of masculinity and femininity and to explain cultural phenomena based on those differences. Weininger was intensely radical in his hatred of women.¹¹ He considered women to be a complete nonentity. Lawrence Kramer explains, "Weininger's new gospel tied the spiritual progress of the human race to the repudiation of its female half."¹² Weininger also used a kind of "science" to back up his arguments. This is investigated by Chandak Sengoopta in "The Unknown Weininger," where Sengoopta concludes that Weininger uses the science, philosophy, and language of his time in order to achieve a specific ideological purpose.¹³ The fact that Weininger's work at the time was "scientifically backed" lent even more credit to Weininger's views and improved the admiration of his critics.

The feminists of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna did not allow this assault to go unacknowledged. German scholar Agatha Schwartz discusses the voices of several prominent feminists who wrote in response to Weininger's writings: Rosa Mayreder, Grete Meisel-Hess, and Irma von Troll-Borostyani. Mayreder pointed out a disconnect between intellect and bisexuality during the emergence of early Christianity, which continued to influence modern misogynists, resulting in a hatred by men of women and sexuality, as men connected the two.¹⁴ Meisel-Hess suggested that rather than women's desire to marry being a sexually defined nature, as stipulated by Weininger, a woman might aspire to more if she had an equal education.¹⁵ Irma von Troll-Borostyani particularly disagreed with Weininger's assertion that women should "be kept from having a share in anything that concerns the public welfare, as it is much to be feared that the mere effect of female influence would be harmful," suggesting that women were being kept in a state of economic dependency and "perpetual immaturity."¹⁶ Schwartz explains that misogynists and feminists alike in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna were striving for a way to save a culture that appeared to both sides to be in decline. The misogynists felt that excluding women from entering the public sphere would preserve the ancient

¹¹ Ibid, 352.

¹² Kramer, 141.

¹³ Chandak Sengoopta, "The Unknown Weininger: Science, Philosophy, and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna," in *Central European History*, Vol. 29, no. 4 (1996): 493.

¹⁴ Schwartz, 353.

¹⁵ Ibid, 354.

¹⁶ Ibid, 355.

status quo. In contrast, Austrian feminists believed that a better society would be achieved and society could be saved from ruin if women were included in the workforce and the public sphere.¹⁷

This was the political climate surrounding gender issues in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. However, as we shall see, an even more potent misogyny could be found amid the burgeoning world of the arts and the influential artists of Vienna.

The Misogynist Art and Culture of *Fin-de-siècle* Vienna

Richard Wagner and the Neo-Gothic Movement in Europe

The obsession with the Middle Ages that gripped Europe during the nineteenth century imposed a new kind of ideology on contemporary treatment of history. Concepts of chivalry and romance, particular to the nineteenth century, were realized in literature, visual art, and music of the time. The very notion of the “damsel in distress,” for instance, became a popular motif that dovetailed nicely with pervasive cultural norms regarding how women should act and behave in contemporary society. Additionally, representations of how the ideals of chastity were threatened by the dangerous seduction of beautiful female sirens were manifest everywhere in the arts during the nineteenth century (i.e. “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” by John Keats, painted by John Waterhouse, or a similar treatment by Sir Frank Dicksee). Neo-Gothic architecture and popular music also reflected this newfound interest in the earlier period. The German composer Richard Wagner was influenced by the medieval sagas of the Germanic people and adapted several of the legendary stories into his own operas, for which he himself wrote the libretti, composed the music, and designed the staging and costumes. Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerken* (complete works of art) reflected his own feelings of German and Teutonic nationalism.

Although Richard Wagner passed away a quarter century before the *fin-de-siècle* period, his words and music were pervasive in the psyche of Central European people, especially the middle class, well into the twentieth century. Otto Weininger himself believed Wagner was “the greatest man since Christ’s time.”¹⁸ Catherine Clément, one of the first musicologists to analyze misogyny in Wagner’s operas, observes, “even before Nazism and the tyrant’s suicide to the accompaniment of *Götterdämmerung* in the Berlin bunker, there was the history of

¹⁷ Ibid, 355.

¹⁸ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 228.

a contradictory Germany and its dream of national unity; there was the life of a Wagner who was prey to bourgeois morality and its obligatory transgressions.”¹⁹

Much ink has been spilled over Wagner’s anti-Semitism and racism, and his “idealism” has been credited with much of the nationalistic fervor that gripped the middle classes of Central Europe through the early part of the twentieth century. The massive importance of his art in the visual, theatric, and musical arts that emerged in Germany and beyond during the latter nineteenth century and into the first quarter of the twentieth cannot be ignored. In fact, Bram Dijkstra suggests that Wagner’s operas “have the dubious distinction of providing the late nineteenth century with the narrative context for many of the details in its iconography of misogyny”²⁰ Dijkstra’s *Idols of Perversity* examines misogyny throughout European culture circa 1900, but focuses predominantly on visual art. ‘Wagner’s influence on even visual art a quarter-century after his death is significant.

Wagner’s misogyny has historically been overlooked by his critics, who have focused more on his anti-Semitism and on the Nazi obsession with his music, and since Nietzsche, his chief critic, was also somewhat misogynistic. Clément sets the scene for her groundbreaking discussion of *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* in her book *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*:

Because of two women, who are the excuse for hiding their flaws, their greed, their pride, and their blindness, [the gods] will die. These god-men are the same ones that opera depicts for you everywhere; but this time they are not to escape.²¹

Clément points out several points about the plot of the *Ring*: women cannot die and go to Valhalla in this mythology²²; all of the important characters are closely related to each other through incest (an obvious point, but one that many people don’t put together), which inherently raises the alarm of the Oedipus complex among others posited by Sigmund Freud²³; and women, as viewed by Wagner, are of no consequence or virtue unless they are sisters.²⁴ While Clément’s discussion of Isolde from *Tristan Und Isolde* does not overall serve the purpose of this paper, she astutely points out a fact about Isolde that is often overlooked: Isolde makes potions and therefore practices a kind of witchcraft, witchcraft being in itself a

¹⁹ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 137.

²⁰ Dijkstra, 228.

²¹ Clément, 139.

²² Ibid, 150.

²³ Ibid, 157.

²⁴ Ibid, 160.

deadly accusation in past centuries whenever communities decided to use women as sacrificial scapegoats.

Susan McClary asserts that Isolde is the sister of Carmen and Salome in her chromaticism, a “slippery chromatic deviation from normative diatonicism....” All three “play maddeningly in the cracks of tonal social convention.”²⁵ In fact, McClary believes that the problem with musical syntax in the early years of the twentieth century was “not just an intellectual or female problem: it was inextricably tangled up with anxiety over sexual identity and gendered distinctions between reason and madness.”²⁶ Wagner was not the first composer to suggest an otherness or even madness in the tonality of a tour-de-force by a female operatic character,²⁷ but continued and intensified a tradition of using mad women²⁸ as vehicles for using nontraditional methods of composition.

Fin-de-siècle Opera and Theatre Following the Tradition of Wagner

Lawrence Kramer suggests that opera in particular is a major vehicle for the kind of ritual sacrifice posited by Girard, especially through the latter half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.²⁹ The characters in these operas, Kramer attests, are “polymorphs,” “dissolvers of boundaries,” “embodiments of the collapse of differences.” Girard noted that most sacrificial victims in world history have not actually been women, but rather men, and thus the *fin-de-siècle* model turns reality on its head.³⁰

Kramer’s views are echoed by other noted scholars, including Susan McClary, who explains:

For the dilemma confronting musical syntax in the early years of [the twentieth] century was not just an intellectual or formal problem: it was inextricably tangled up with anxiety over sexual identity and gendered distinctions between reason and madness.³¹

In other words, the gender and sexual crisis that gripped Vienna and other parts of Europe at the dawn of the twentieth century bled into the art and music of the time.

²⁵ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 100.

²⁶ McClary, 103.

²⁷ Donizetti’s Lucia famously precedes Isolde.

²⁸ In Isolde’s case, deathly mad with love.

²⁹ Kramer, 151.

³⁰ Ibid, 151.

³¹ McClary, 103.

Although Wagner was truly revolutionary in his treatment of opera, by the *fin-de-siècle* period, his words and music as well as his writings and philosophy about music were considered a standard by which other artists should abide. Gustav Mahler, for instance, was famously criticized in the press in 1900 for not following Wagner's famous guidelines of 1873 on the best orchestral alterations for Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.³²

Richard Strauss famously followed in the tradition of grand German opera after Wagner and was strongly influenced by the works of Wagner. Strauss and his librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, created several great operas together, two of which are in the undoubtedly misogynist genre. *Salome*, based on the play by Oscar Wilde, opens with a scene which McClary describes as one where Salome's "sexual presence has already contaminated the entire court" owing to the tonality (an unconventional one) and great use of chromaticism (or "chromatic slippage," in McClary's terminology).³³ McClary suggests that Strauss uses the character Salome for musical passages that are studies in "lurid excessiveness" and that he in turn uses the character of Herod to appeal to social convention and get the opera back to a "normative tonality," resulting in a treatment of Salome that frames her "as a diseased and radically Other" entity, the entire work being one McClary finds "disingenuous."³⁴ By McClary's definition, Strauss, like his hero Wagner, uses Salome as a vehicle for musical obscenity, and in doing so, displays her as a sacrificial victim.

Lawrence Kramer investigates the sexual politics of Strauss and Hofmannsthal's opera *Elektra* in his article "*Fin-de-siècle* fantasies: *Elektra*, degeneration and sexual science." In terms of Girard's concept of a sacrificial woman for society's changes, Kramer considers *Elektra* the ultimate operatic sacrificial character. *Elektra* is "polymorphic" but ultimately is murdered by the very music of the opera. Kramer suggests "one answer is that *Elektra*, as sacrificial victim, at last becomes the emblem of the order she serves: lying rigid, extinguished as a subject, she becomes the phallus."³⁵

³²To this day, the theatre Wagner designed and implemented for the performances of his works at Bayreuth continues to be used for revered performances of his works, tickets for which must be purchased years in advance. Also see K. M. Knittel, "Polemik im Concertsaal: Mahler, Beethoven, and the Viennese Critics," in *19th Century Music*, vol. 29, no.3 (2006): 290.

³³ McClary, 100.

³⁴ Ibid, 101.

³⁵ Kramer, 164.

Kokoschka's "Murderer, Hope of Women"

Although Oskar Kokoschka's Expressionist play *Murderer, Hope of Women* was not adapted into an opera until Paul Hindemith gave it a one-act treatment in 1921, it is an important part of Expressionist theatre development, and a shining example of the use of a sacrificial victim in the form of a woman during the *fin-de-siècle* period. Kokoschka wrote the play in 1909, and it involves a Man, a Woman, and warriors and maidens. The play results in the Man killing the Woman with a mere touch, then killing the warriors and maidens, and exiting in a passage of fire. The aspect of the Man exiting into a passage of fire resonates with the belief in the purity of the Aryan male during the *fin-de-siècle* period, as images in art during the period of "the viraginous woman" and the "effeminate Jew" merge together to "depredate the gold, the pure seed of the Aryan male."³⁶

Kokoschka famously had his inner demons, and one prime example of his deep-seated issues with women lies in his relationship with Alma Mahler Gropius, the widow of the composer Gustav Mahler and also of Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus movement of design. Alma had many famous lovers, and when she broke up with Kokoschka, he ordered a life-sized doll of Alma that he took with him to the opera and concerts. The Alma doll would be everything to Kokoschka that she would no longer be. Kokoschka eventually threw a coming-out party for the Alma doll during which the doll was beheaded.³⁷ Kokoschka also tortured past lovers after a performance of *Don Giovanni* when he invited them to his house and had the waiter serve them all soup with his thumb immersed in each bowl, and as such "the mad genius had found another means of fighting back at the women who had made him lose his equanimity."³⁸ By encapsulating what seemed to Kokoschka the essence of his former lover into a doll, Kokoschka found a way to control this woman who threatened him. He clearly poured his problems with women into *Murderer*, allowing the Woman, the murder victim by Man, to be sacrificed as a scapegoat for the ills of all womankind and the threat they bore to mankind.

Misogyny by the *fin-de-siècle* period in Vienna had quickly become part of a deeply ingrained way of looking at the world for many members of society, including artists. The threat of any possible change of the status quo that might have resulted in women moving out of the closely circumscribed roles assigned to them by men urged many prominent artists of the time to portray women as dangerous entities of sexuality and death in visual art and stage works. In so doing,

³⁶ Dijkstra, 401.

³⁷ Karen Monson, *Alma Mahler: Muse to Genius*. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1983), 206-7.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 208.

they were truly creating the sacrificial victims of René Girard's philosophy, in a very public and effective manner—notably one that would have most strongly affected the middle-class concert-, theatre-, and art-goers. The implications of the extreme misogyny in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna and beyond had long-term sinister effects. The misogyny of the time was hand-in-hand with a growing anti-Semitism and exclusive nationalism that eventually led to the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust. The diabolical horizon beyond the *fin-de-siècle* period is best described by Bram Dijkstra:

The deadly racist and sexist evolutionary dreams of turn-of-the-century culture fed the masochistic middle-class fantasy in which the godlike Greek, the Führer, the lordly executioner...symbol of masculine power... would ... bring on the millennium of pure blood, evolving genes, and men who were men. If it was difficult to execute one's wife — not to say inconvenient—there was always the effeminate Jew. Fantasies of gynocide thus opened the door to the realities of genocide. The twentieth century was to prove that it had understood the murderous implications of the imperial symbolism of evolutionary inequality all too well.³⁹

Overcoming the legacy of racism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism shaped the geopolitics of Europe for the rest of the century. These battles were to be fought in the open plains of history, between armies and governments that would slaughter millions of humans. However, overcoming the legacy of misogyny and sexism became a longer and more subtle war. The *fin-de-siècle* period in Vienna, and its diabolical horizon, helped to set the scene for the battles to come.

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³⁹ Dijkstra, 401.

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